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GREENBACKS.

A POEM FOR THE TIMES.

BY EDWARD WILLETS.



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“GREENBACKS.”

A POEM FOR THE TIMES.

I.

I WANDERED o'er a battle-field,
One of a thousand such, or more,
That blot the land. The trampled turf
Was red and wet with slippery gore.

I scarce could pick my path among
The heaps of slaughtered men and brutes,
Piled thick around me everywhere,—
The bloody battle's rotting fruits.

And these were all — these broken things
Were all the fruits the battle had.
It was for this a thousand died ;
For this ten thousand hearts are sad.

No longer foemen, blues and grays
Lay stretched as they were stabbed or shot.
Whoever gained a victory there,
'Twas very plain that these did not.

They by the stoutest of all foes
Were stricken and were gathered in, —
A foe who wears no shoulder-straps,
Whose triumphs need no bulletin.

Two years ago, how full of life
And strength and hope were all these dead !
How fresh and green this battle-field,
Ere brothers' blood had dyed it red !

Two years — two mad and reckless years —
 A century of blood and woe ! —
 Two years of blunders and of crimes
 Have laid the proudest nation low.

By Northern lead and Southern steel
 Fresh slaughtered, there the victims lay ;
 For Night and Death had quenched the hate
 That flamed and scorched that fearful day.

Together all their sinful souls,
 Blood-burdened, had gone up to God,
 Whose justice knows no North or South,
 But asks of each his brother's blood.

Not all are dead. Some feebly drag
 Their broken limbs across the plain,
 To seek a quiet spot to die,
 A shelter from the driving rain.

Among the corpses piled and pale,
 A few are living, here and there ;
 A few, with fast-abating breath,
 Can shriek a curse or moan a prayer.

A few, through chilling rain and sleet,
 Upturn their slowly glazing eyes ;
 But see no beam of hope above,
 No rainbow in the sullen skies.

Across the misty, sodden field,
 Vainly their aching sight they strain ;
 For friend or foe, to bear them thence,
 They search the night, and search in vain.

In vain — for they must bleed and die :
 No succoring hand may reach them yet ;
 Both sides had gained the victory,
 And both must save their etiquette !

The victory ! God save the land,
 This stricken land, from more of these !
 And hasten on the better days,
 Peace, and her bloodless victories !

The victory ! In such a strife
 Victors and vanquished find defeat !
 And God, in his own time and way,
 To both will equal judgment mete.

Still fell the rain on friend and foe,
 On dead and living, through the night.
 The wind outhowled the cries below,
 Till broke the morning's sombre light.

The driving rain had swept the plain,
 And washed the pools of blood away ;
 But nothing recked those " victors " then,
 As cold and pale and stiff they lay.

Is all this blood for nought ? I asked ;
 Is all this sacrifice in vain ?
 What profit have we for our loss ?
 I cried ; what is it that we gain ?

A vulture, feasting daintily
 Upon a fair young face near by,
 Paused for a moment from his meal,
 And croaked, half-choked, the sole reply :
 " GREENBACKS ! "

And then all heart and hope within me died.
 " Unquestioning loyalty " was satisfied.

II.

Here is a hospital ; its every floor
 Is thickly piled with dying and with dead ;
 And still they come, and there is room for more,
 To fill the place of those whom death has sped.

Each comer finds the sheets already warm
 With his last life-beat, who, a moment since,
 Was carried out a corpse, whose broken form
 Upon the yielding couch has left its prints.

Shaded by lofty trees, shut in by swamps,
 A monster graveyard stretches out from here ;
 A pestilential spot, whose poisonous damps
 Press on the brain, and chill the heart with fear.

Daily it grows, and daily claims its prey ;
 Daily it opens wide its ravenous mouth ;
 A hundred men are added every day
 To this new, silent City of the South.

The air is heavy with the groans and sighs
 That tortured frames from stoutest hearts will force.
 O God of peace, behold the sacrifice !
 Let the Peace-angel hither wing his course !

All do not die. Some struggle home again,
 With lopped-off limbs, a piteous sight to see,
 And linger out a weary life of pain,
 Eating the bitter bread of charity.

What do we get for these our faithful dead ?
 I asked, — these worn and mutilated forms ?
 What get we for this waste of life ? I said ;
 What do we get, from man or from the worms ?

A weary surgeon, with a bloody knife,
 Wiping a blood-spirt from his hither eye,
 Dropped down a severed limb yet warm with life,
 Laid by his saw, and coldly made reply :

“GREENBACKS !”

III.

Sweet home ! Young father, wert thou here
 To look upon thy latest born,
 'Twould be the happiest of the year,
 This fresh and smiling April morn !

Young mother ! pale and wan thou art.
 'Tis hard to suffer thus alone.
 Thank God that hope yet fills thy heart,
 That prayer can mingle with thy moan.

Well may thy mother cherish thee,
 Sweet baby-boy, whose infant prattle
 Shall please him, when, from duty free
 And perils of the camp and battle,

He seeks his quiet home again,
 And, numbering o'er thy childish charms,
 Forgets his former toil and pain.
 Unheeding war or war's alarms !

Next June will surely see him here,
 Forever free of camps and wars.
 And will he be a jot less dear,
 If worn and maimed and gashed with scars ?

Ah, no ! though lopped and bruised his frame,
 Our tears of joy will blind our eyes.
 If they but leave his heart the same,
 They leave enough for us to prize.

Young mother, do not read that scrawl !
 There's in it what you must not know.
 One fearful glance has told her all.
 God save me from such utter woe !

How peacefully her spirit passed,
 As seeking his who went before !
 Come, little orphans, look your last ;
 Go, take them, Nurse, and close the door.

Again I asked, What do we get
 For lives so young and fresh and fair ?
 What price is on the priceless set ?
 And what shall be the orphan's share ?

A cold wind from the poorhouse door
 Crept swiftly out and passed me by.
 As down the little lane it tore,
 It shrieked and shuddered the reply :

“ GREENBACKS ! ”

IV.

There's a river that runs from the North to the South,
 Channelled by God's mighty hand.
 It runs between valleys of cotton and corn,
 And once on its beautiful bosom was borne
 The wealth of a wonderful land.

The valleys spread out upon either side,
 Richer than fabulous mines,
 Reaching from regions of ice and snow,
 Down through the limitless prairies below,
 To the land of the palms and the vines.

Navies, whose cost would have beggared a king,
 Calmly its waters caressing,
 Floated for years on its arrowy tide,
 Wedding the South to the North as a bride —
 Navies of peace and of blessing.

Magical cities arose on its banks,
 Wonders of wealth and of grace.
 Forests were melted, and temples were reared;
 Hamlets and towns as by magic appeared,
 Gemming its beautiful face.

The wonderful river is silent now,
 Bolted and locked and barred!
 Its current is rapid as ever before,
 But the navies of peace its bosom once bore
 Are under suspicion and guard!

Vain are the riches of valley and plain,
 All in that wonderful land;
 For the river that wedded the North and the South
 Is closed at the middle and closed at the mouth,
 Closed by an iron hand.

On the limitless prairies the corn may grow rank,
 And down in the valleys below
 The cotton and cane may flourish in vain,
 Till God shall see fit to sunder the chain
 That severs the palms from the snow.

The navies that float on the wonderful stream
 Are navies of terror and wrath.
 Destruction and death through the valleys they bear,
 With sulphurous vapors they burden the air,
 And fury flames up in their path.

The cities are sullen and sorrowful now ;
 Their beauty is wasted and worn.
 The hamlets and towns are shattered and burned ;
 The panther, the bear, and the wolf have returned
 To the fields of the cotton and corn.

What do we get for this loss ? I asked ;
 Loss of a wonderful land ;
 Loss of our navies of blessing and peace,
 Fruit of the corn and cotton's increase —
 What have we got in our hand ?

A half-burned steamer, broken and charred,
 Lay at the bank near by ;
 And the water surged through the useless wreck,
 The bell still hung on the shattered deck,
 And solemnly tolled the reply :
“ GREENBACKS ! ”

V.

Here are two forts — two massive frames —
 In two such lovely harbors set.
 They bear the glorious sainted names
 Of Warren and of Lafayette.

Such names of noble men alone
 Should guard the happy and the free
 From small-souled tyrants, undergrown,
 From one-man rule and anarchy.

Those sacred names of holy dead
 Are turned to sounds of hate and fear, —
 Changed to the words of blood and dread,
 Of Danton and of Robespierre.

Those massive walls, so broad and stout,
 Too well the bleeding country guard ;
 No longer keep the tyrant out,
 But hold the freeman chained and barred.

The good, the learned, the true, the brave,
 Such homes have long inhabited,
 Have found those walls a living grave,
 Or gone forth scorned, or crazed, or dead.

Some petty fault of word or look,
 Or breach of some unlawful law,
 First heard of in the order-book
 Of any shoulder-strapped bashaw,

Lack of lip-service, or of blame
 For those their rulers chose to hate,
 Have brought the good and pure to shame,
 And earned the free a felon's fate.

How long, O Lafayette ! how long !
 How long, brave Warren ! shall this be ?
 Why have your memories died among
 The men your virtues helped to free !

I asked, What profit shall we have —
 What pay for this, our greatest sin ?
 What gain for digging such a grave
 To bury fettered Freedom in ?

Across the water clanked the chain,
 And from a casement swelled the sigh
 Of some poor prisoner there in pain,
 And bore to me the sole reply :

“ GREENBACKS ! ”

VI.

Way down in the town of Magnificent Distances
 Is running a wonderful new machine,
 Which Salmon P. Chase facetiously christens his
 Great Scheme of Finance. “ All is serene ”
 As it grinds out by night and grinds out by day
 That wonderful legend “ We Promise to Pay.”

O magical workmen, how rapidly hammer ye,
 "Knocking the spots" out of silver and gold !
 For Salmon P. Chase, with his wonderful granarye,
 Touches the paper so swiftly unrolled,
 And gives it the weight and the ring and the shine
 Of metal from placer or metal from mine.

Be happy, O people ! for Salmon has taught to ye
 Lessons of profit and lessons of gain,
 Worth all the bullion that ever was brought to ye,
 Out of your placers or over the main :
 'Tis only repeating (you'll learn in a day)
 I Promise, You Promise, We Promise to Pay !

Paper and ink the magician possesses, he
 Wantonly, recklessly grinds as he will.
 Daily and nightly, with plentiful presses, he
 Turns out his bundles of currency still.
 How neatly he colors the ceaseless supply,
 With black from his heart and with green from his eye !

A wonderful chemist we have in the Treasury,
 Building of paper a monster balloon ;
 Building it splendidly up at his leisure, he
 Hopes it will carry him up to the moon.
 No gas will be lacking the wonder to fill,
 For the House and the Senate are close to his mill.

He fears not that soon, when the horrible sulphurous
 Vapors of war are swept out of the air,
 A fearful thereafter may open a gulf for us,
 Charming balloonist and passengers there !
 He had better pack up his fine presses and "traps,"
 Ere the gas shall escape and the monster collapse !

VII.

Enter the Everlasting Nigger.]

EVERLASTING NIGGER *loquitur*.

Behold me here, the bugbear of the land,
 A man, a brother, and a contraband !
 Of late a slave, now owning many slaves ;
 Proprietor of many thousand graves.

They all are mine, those hosts that hasten forth,
 Alike from sunny South or frozen North :
 From drummer-boy to blustering brigadier,
 My cause they reverence, and my name they fear ;
 For me this blood is poured upon the plain —
 Mine are the fruitless triumphs that they gain.
 Your armies — blues and butternuts and grays —
 All wear my livery ; whoever pays,
 I am the master ; let them bow the knee !
 They toil, they suffer, and they die for me.
 Cotton is King, and I am King of Cotton ;
 We strengthen all your States or make them rotten.
 We feed you, or we starve you as we will ;
 We make you fat, or hound you on to kill.
 Mine are your forts, your castles, and your jails,
 And every fighting craft that steams or sails.
 I create States, and change their boundaries,
 And bend your Constitutions as I please,
 Or break them. White brains have ruled too long,
 While I have only treasured up my wrong.
 White brains must work for me, who have no brains !
 Writhe as you may, you cannot break your chains.

Nay, do not start, for I am harmless yet ;
 My hands with human blood were never wet ;
 I never drew a sword or pulled a trigger ;
 But I was made the Everlasting Nigger,
 And could not help it. God created me,
 As well as you ; perhaps he made me free ;
 Perhaps my brow still bears the fatal stain
 That made a broken wanderer of Cain,
 And dooms his race, from then till judgment-day,
 To lowliness and toil, and scanty pay.
 I know not, for God's ways are past my ken,
 Except that I am not as other men.
 But here I am, be it for good or bad —
 A tougher problem Earth has never had.
 Would you might solve me — I would thank you well —
 But fear I must remain insolvable.
 An ebony enigma, here I stand,
 Your slave, your master, and your contraband.

No heart or hope have I in all this strife,
 In all this reckless, useless waste of life.
 Whate'er the issue of the fearful fight,
 Through clouds of blood and smoke I see no light.
 What gain can any issue be to me,
 Though I and all my hapless race be free?
 Free to do what? To crawl along the street,
 Still trampled on by every white man's feet,
 To beg our daily bread, or steal, or die;
 When white men starve, what hope have such as I?
 Free to be driven forth, a hated thing,
 Cursed as the cause of all this suffering,
 To rot and die, unaided and alone,
 In that wild land which still they call our own.
 No, stop your war, and end your horrid strife!
 Do with me as you please, but leave me life.
 Count up the cost! Shed no more blood for me!
 What matters if I am slave or free?
 'Tis but a choice of evils: and the first,
 In days like these, can hardly be the worst.
 Let peace enrich and bless your glorious land!
 For God alone can help the contraband.
[Exit Everlasting Nigger.]

I praised the Everlasting Nigger's speech.
 By mouths of babes and simple, God can teach
 The wisest wisdom. Would we all were wise,
 That God forever would unseal our eyes;
 Then would these woful, bloody days be o'er;
 This happy land of ours would need no more
"GREENBACKS!"

VIII.

O pleasant village bells! too long,
 Church-going bells! from tower and steeple,
 At war's command, your notes have rung,
 Harsh-voiced, to call a frenzied people
 To carnage. Let your anger cease,
 And ring in sweetly days of peace!

O mothers of the fatherless !

What gain will pay you for your loss ?
 And will it lessen your distress
 To know that others bear the cross ?
 And can your poor hearts envy those
 Who still have husbands left to lose ?

O high-placed minister ! to you

We look to point the better path,
 To tell us of the pure and true,
 The word of peace, and not of wrath.
 Why mingle with our Sabbath food
 Prayers for revenge and cries for blood !

Our God of Love is still supreme,

And " moves in a mysterious way."
 However dark the night may seem,
 His sun will surely bless the day.
 A God of mercy is our God ;
 Oh, pray him stay the chastening rod !

Virginia ! all thy fertile plains

Are graveyards, stained with brothers' blood !
 The early and the latter rains,
 Besom of March and April's flood,
 While grass shall grow where corpses rot,
 Can ne'er efface the damning spot.

Virginia ! altar of the land !

Our sacrifice on thee is laid.
 O God ! it is enough ! Thy hand
 May, for thy mercy's sake, be stayed.
 The first-born of our hearts to thee
 We freely gave, and fruitlessly !

Old Faneuil Hall ! behold the child

Thou cradledst in the days of old !
 Men's passions, unrestrained and wild,
 Sectional hate, and greed of gold,
 Are strangling now, with hands accursed,
 The wondrous infant thou hast nursed.

I call in vain ! That noble Hall,
 The cradle of our liberty,
 Is changed ; fanatics mean and small
 Have brought another brood to thee,
 Black-visaged, brainless hantlings, born
 Of Puritanic pride and scorn.

How long, O martyred, blessed band !
 O patriots of the purer time !
 Shall little men destroy the land,
 Drench it with blood and cloud with crime !
 Can all those negroes, starved and free,
 Repay our loss of liberty ?
 O worthy sons of noble sires !
 Ye are not yet entirely mad ;
 Rekindle now the pure old fires !
 Rise up, and let the earth be glad !
 Speak out ! These rulers of a day
 Will hear, and dare not disobey !

IX.

The Centre has called to the limitless West,
 And the West to the Centre in thunder replies.
 The language is plain — do you deem it a jest ?
 O President ! Cabinet ! open your eyes !
 Listen and shudder and tremble and quake !
 You had better not sleep when the people awake.

The limitless West to the Centre has said,
 “ We have watered the earth with our blood, as with rain ;
 The fields of the South are enriched with our dead ;
 Our substance is scattered and wasted — in vain !
 We have given up all to the demon of War,
 Even our liberty. What is it for ? ”

To the limitless West the Centre has said,
 “ We have given our children and given our gold ;
 The demon of war to the full we have fed ;
 We have mortgaged our lives and our future have sold.
 Our gold has but melted ; our children but rot ;
 And we must be fettered at home — for what ? ”

[Enter and exit the Everlasting Nigger.]

The West and the Centre together have said,
 "Too long were we blinded, but now do we see!
 Too long by blind guides have we blindly been led.
 No more of such leaders for you or for me :"
 Their ballots fell fast as the flakes of the snow,
 Laying the grave-digging dynasty low.

The wave is yet rising, and still will it grow
 In volume and force, till 't sweeps from its path
 The fools and fanatics and workers of woe,
 The teachers of tyranny, teachers of wrath ;
 Till the North and the South to each other shall call,
 And the flag of the Union shall float over all.

Tried friends of your country, now, now is the hour !
 At once in the front your proud banners unfold !
 Though the war-wolves may howl at you, yours is the power ;
 If your heads are but copper, your hearts are of gold !
 'Tis yours to restore us the Union of yore,
 With its old Constitution, its gold, and no more

"GREENBACKS."

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